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AUTHOR Andersen, Kenneth E.
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ABSTRACT

The mechanisms by which nonparticipants come to exert a particular emphasis upon the ethical dimensions of the communication process and why the pressures exerted may be toward a more ideal ethic rather than toward actual practice is the focus of this paper. The paper begins by noting that an analysis of how nonparticipants contribute to the ethical dimensions of a communication activity involves at least an examination of an individual's or group's actions, and a differentiation between the mechanisms by which the individuals in a particular communication interaction derived their ethical norms and practices. The paper then explores two interests of modern ethicists that provide a basis for initial analysis of both these dimensions: (1) the analytical movement with an effort to define the nature of morality, what constitutes a morality or a moral point of view; and (2) the problem of the relationship between the morality of an individual and that of a group or society. Based on this exploration, the paper posits that nonparticipants provide a morality that constitutes a framework within which communication must function. The paper concludes that the existence of that morality legitimates intervention and pressure by nonparticipants so that they may become participants in several ways, including becoming an active participant on an immediate basis, or by having an impact upon the ultimate effect through any number of communication processes. (HTH)

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THE ETHICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF 'NON-PARTICIPANTS' IN A COMMUNICATION ACTIVITY

Kenneth E. Andersen

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In my Speech Communication Association Presidential Address, I set forth six articles of an ethical code for communication activity:

1. Accept a proper burden of responsibility for the communication activity in whatever position you find yourself in a particular interaction.
2. Act so that potential effectiveness of all future communication is enhanced.
3. Act to maximize individual freedom of choice and responsibility while enhancing the quality of the society as a whole.
4. Act so that respect of each participant for self and for the other is maximized.
5. Act to improve communication ability and understanding.
6. Enforce the code upon self and upon all others.[1]

In developing that code I made specific reference to recent efforts to expand upon a device labeled the 200% theory of responsibility[2] arguing that it should rather be a 300% theory of responsibility with emphasis given to the role of the non-participant in the communication activity as well as the speaker-listerner, writer-reader, source-receiver, or whatever similar rubric might be employed. The rationale for that expansion is argued in various papers, one published in the Southern Journal.[3] That rationale should be refined and expanded. Further, the means for fulfilling that responsibility should be explicated.

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The present essay may, by implication, do some of both. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the mechanisms by which non-participants come to exert a particular emphasis upon the ethical dimensions of the communication process and why the pressures exerted may be toward a more ideal ethic than is the actual practice of the society.

A complete analysis of how non-participants contribute to the ethical dimensions of a communication activity would involve as a minimum the examination of actions of individuals, groups, the society as a whole including its culture, and probe the relationships among these entities in terms of ethical influences. Further, the analysis would differentiate between the mechanisms by which the individuals in a particular communication interaction derived their ethical norms and practices as a result of influences acting upon them and particular instances of communication with specific webs of influence and possible actions operating in a particular communication-binding context.

Two interests of modern ethicists provide a basis for initial analysis of both dimensions: one the analytical movement with an effort to define the nature of morality, what constitutes a morality or a moral point of view, and, second, a not unrelated problem of the relationship between the morality of an individual and that of a group or society.

Let us begin with the first problem: how is it that non-participants come to have a distinctive interest in the ethical dimension of communication and a warrant to intervene in areas related to ethical practice that differs from conditions for intervention in other areas.

Kurt Baier attempts to establish a set of rules to determine whether an

item can be said to belong to the morality of a group as contrasted to a law, etiquette, etc. For an item to be part of a group's morality:

> . . . it should be: (1) part of the mores of the group, (2) supported by the characteristically moral pressure, (3) universally teachable and therefore universalizable, (4) not merely a taboo, (5) applied in accordance with certain principles of exception and modification [provided for in the morality itself, e.g. to kill in self-defense], (6) applied in accordance with certain principles of application whose prevalence is a condition for the group being said to have a morality. [This latter rule has to do with principles of differentiation, as when a rule applies to one person in one role or in one situation and not another and principles of priority, having to do with hierarchical ordering when moral articles conflict.][4]

Baier argues that criticism of a morality demands using the point of view of morality which he sees as rules

> designed to regulate the behavior of people all of whom are to be treated as equally important "centers" of cravings, impulses, desires, needs, aims and aspirations; as people with ends of their own. . . . The pursuits and wishes and ends of none of these goal seekers are be subordinated without special justification to those of any one or any group of them.[5]

He sees genuinely moral rules limiting the pursuit of one's own greatest good at the expense of legitimate interests of others. A genuine morality provides the basis for electing among alternatives when conflicts occur, when particular vocational or social roles are served, or when injuries have been done.[6]

Baier's effort to identify "What makes a consideration moral?" is helpful in understanding how non-participants, those not immediately apparent as involved in a communication interchange, contribute to the ethical dimensions of that communication activity. The group morality is publicly proclaimed and publicly taught in settings ranging from the classroom to reinforcement in speeches, rituals, and ordinary conversation. Communication activities are of significant interest to non-participants in that such activities reinforce and refine the various moral articles. Ordinary communication activities given such rubrics as "shoptalk," "gossip," "what's happening" can be fruitfully analyzed to identify the morality of the group or society with particular attention given to identifying principles of differentiation, so crucial in assessing blame, excusing, or praising behavior.[7] If one violates or appears to contradict the action presumably directed by an article, one expects pressure. On one hand a speaker may use an ethical norm as a warrant for action. On the other hand, a speaker will feel the need to justify an apparent violation either within the rules of the morality or by arguing that it is not a fully valid moral article. Non-participants clearly set constraints upon ethical appeals and actions.

Secondly, there is a strong presumption that a person not actively involved in the communication exchange has a legitimate right to intervene since this is an issue of morality, not manners, style, or just a private matter. This arises out of the domain of ethics itself. While much of the philosophical discussion of ethics in the Twentieth Century has focused upon the issue of individual moral autonomy, ethics is concerned with the relationships among individuals in the society. Recent ethical theorists have spent a good deal of time in revitalizing variations of the social contract theory, e.g. Rawls, or returning to a neo-Aristotelian emphasis upon the

virtues, e.g., MacIntyre.[8] Not only is a morality seen as a cement making a society possible, ". . . we are embedded in a social context and that society shapes and gives purpose to our lives. In particular, a social context gives content to our moral lives.[9]

This legitimation of active intervention to support the morality of the polis is one index of the distinctive social pressure associated with those things linked to morality. Justification, excusing, admitting error are possible and often successful responses. But intervention when ethical issues are at stake is legitimate in a society. In this context the "civil religion" of Bellah and the "American Creed" of Myrdal with their associated moral connotations (perhaps moralistic would be a more appropriate term in some contexts) become potent factors to be reckoned with. If one characteristic of a morality is enforcement with a distinctive social pressure, people who take a certain view to be "moral" feel legitimated in demanding a response from communicators who do not share the presumption that the matter is one of "morality." This difference I believe to be a key factor in disputes related to what many label "single issue politics."

The second major issue to be addressed is the role of non-participants in providing a moral standard which is in some sense an idealized morality, offering a goal as well as a clarity of vision far beyond that of the apparently contradictory actions of individuals in response to their own moral precepts and going beyond what may be seen as a actual morality of a society.

Strawson in one of his rare articles dealing with ethics describes the apparent contradictory nature of the actions of an individual, responding to this and then to that image of ethical behavior. Yet, "Something approaching

consistency, some more or less steady balance, is usually detectable in the pattern of an individual person's decisions and actions."[10] Strawson argues that morality is necessarily social, indeed, that "the existence of some such set of rules is a condition of the existence of a society."[11] He promptly identifies this as a minimal conception of morality. "The fundamental idea is that of a social sanctioned demand made on an individual in virtue merely of his membership of the society in question, or in virtue of a particular position which he occupies with it or a particular relation in which he stands to other members in it."[12] Stawson notes that one can think of the various individual moralities as contributing to a kind of social morality. This social morality in turn contains the seeds of moral criticism and such critical activity contains the "seeds of a morality transcending standard social relationships."[13] The criticism of the shared social morality leads to a kind of ideal of what the morality of the society could be and some sense of pressure to achieve this. The process envisioned suggests ways in which a group's shared morality comes to present a clearer, more idealized version of key action guiding rules than an individual is likely to consciously hold or than either the individual or the society of which she is a part will actually realize. This process yields an idealization of what the morality should be--but an idealization which is the result of criticism and reflection about practices with a sense of intrinsic development and with an implication of achievability.

Perhaps this process of yielding an ideal for social interaction brings us back to the Aristotelian notion of the role of politics, the science of sound governance of the polis. We are reminded of his belief that to live the good life individuals must live in the good polis, the well-governed polis which draws forth the best from its citizens and in turn makes the good possible for

them. Rhetoric and ethics are subordinate to but essential in politics.

In summary, non-participants affect communication in two quite different ways: first in setting the framework of the moral and ethical conventions within which the communication events will occur; second in terms of effects specific to a particular communicative event, however that event may be defined by a communication-binding context. Similarly the non-participants' role may be differentiated in terms of the individual non-participant qua individual and non-participants taken as a part of the particular community or group. Those interested in how the non-participants function in terms of the web of ethical relationships tied to communication have vast areas to explore.

This paper has posited that non-participants provide a morality that constitutes a framework within which communication must function. The existence of that morality legitimates intervention and pressure by non-participants so that they may become participants in several ways including becoming an active participant on an immediate basis, or by having an impact upon the ultimate effect through any number of communication processes. Acceptance of the legitimacy of intervention by non-participants and a burden of rebuttal and/or justification when challenged for violating the shared morality is a reality of living in a particular society. (Different cultures may not contain the same moral articles although there are those who argue that they necessarily contain the same moral questions to be addressed.) Second, by nature of the processes of moving from individual morality to a somewhat shared social morality that in turn is subjected to criticism, a somewhat idealized morality arises as a standard against which communication may be assessed.

Both processes should be seen as necessary, healthy ones. Since the continuation of a society--even its existence--depends upon the communication process to achieve a necessary degree of community and shared standards, the testing of ethical bases and the active promotion of those shared bases in the the discourse of a society is essential. To the degree that the idealized morality is a legitimate one, and not beyond the possible given the practices of the society, there is a pressure introduced to enhance the ethical quality of communication practice, in turn improving the quality of the polis itself. One function of communication criticism, for example, would be to enhance the desirable features of these natural processes. We can enhance or detract from the richness of these practices by our research, our teaching, and particularly the criticisms we render of communication activity. While we may not achieve Reagan's shining city on the hill, the activities of "non-participants" can move us in that direction.

ENDNOTES

Kenneth E. Andersen (Ph. D. Wisconsin 1961) is Professor of Speech Communication and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

[1]Kenneth E. Andersen, "A Code of Ethics for Speech Communication," Spectra, XX (January, 1984), 2-3.

[2]Kenneth E. Andersen, Persuasion Theory and Practice, 2nd ed. (Boston: American Press, 1983), pp. 353-56.

[3]Kenneth E. Andersen, "Communication Ethics: The Non-Participant's Role," Southern Speech Communication Journal, XL (1984), 219-228.

[4]Kurt Baier, "The Point of View of Morality," Australasian Journal of Philosophy, XXXII (1954) as reprinted in Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller, Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 325.

[5]Baier, p. 335.

[6]Baier, pp. 335-36.

[7]A particularly interesting exposition of this point designed for the general public is an essay by Lance Morrow, "The Morals of Gossip" Time, October 26, 1981, p. 98.

[8]John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972); Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981).

[9]H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., "Moral Autonomy and the Polis: Response to Gerald Dworkin and Gregory Vlastos," Morals Science and Society, eds. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., and Daniel Callahan (Hastings-on-Hudson: The Hastings Center, 1978), p. 202.

[10]P. F. Strawson, "Social Morality and Individual Ideal," Philosophy, XXXVI (1961) reprinted in Pahel and Schiller, p. 345.

[11]Strawson, p. 348

[12]Strawson, p. 349.

[13]Strawson, p. 356